REVIEW OF: "CAN WE WIN IN VIETNAM?"

By Armbruster, Gastil, Kahn, Pfaff and Stillman
(Praeger, New York, 1968; 427 pages, $7.95)

Reviewed by: Daniel Ellsberg
The RAND Corporation

The Hudson Institute has found an admirable way to combat two damaging, and often undeserved, public impressions about independent, non-profit defense research contractors: that they are monolithic, and that they are stooges for, or at least constrained to be uncritical of, a Service or Administration policy line. The solution here is to bind together the disparate views of individual members and exhibit Hudson staff to the public in the process of arguing and in many cases disagreeing sharply with each other and with official U.S. Government positions.

This dialectical approach is, moreover, substantively rewarding when the subject matter is so complex and controversial as that of Vietnam policy. No one writer, even if he tries, is likely to give attention to more than a few of the different relevant points of view and paths of approach to these problems, and each of the five writers represented here adds significantly to the discussion, as does their direct confrontation in a roundtable symposium concluding the book.

In fact, the adversarial format of the book seems so effective a framework for explicating major issues underlying policy questions that one wishes its potential had been exploited somewhat more. The papers by Frank Armbruster and Raymond Gastil, on the one hand, presenting the case for pressing on toward past Administration objectives in Vietnam via a considerably modified military/police strategy, and the opposing

papers by Edmund Stillman and William Pfaff, arguing for cutting losses, seem to have been written in isolation from each other and rarely meet head on. Instead of the comparison of evidence and cross-examination of opposing hypotheses that the book's structure seems to promise, one finds that quite different factors and issues are raised in each essay, and the various assertions slip past each other with only occasional challenge. This is compensated by Herman Kahn's three chapters, in which he goes beyond the written contributions of the other authors to summarize and compare their points of view and differences.

The discipline of this responsibility is obviously valuable to Kahn's own style of presentation, which throughout this book is sober, judicious, and lacking in flamboyance. (His concluding sentence -- apparently written after the Tet offensive, while the book was conceived and mostly written before it -- is understandably but unwontedly diffident: "It seems to me that despite the general feeling today that everything has been tried and nothing works, and that we are in a morass, we can in fact responsibly -- with good faith and good heart -- dedicate ourselves at the least to an intelligent temporizing action, and possibly to victory itself." As a response to the clarion question of the title, this sounds rather an uncertain trumpet.)

Three of the authors -- Kahn, Armbruster and Gastil -- are described as in "limited but reasonably broad agreement with many of the policies and objectives of the Johnson Administration" (though Gastil's discussion of Vietnamese realities leads him to such conditional and pessimistic conclusions that it is not clear how far he should really be linked to the

other "war-winners.") Nevertheless, they take strong exception to many Administration positions and policies (including "attrition" theory and practice, indiscriminate use of firepower, escalation as it has been pursued, and the then-current bombing campaign in Tonkin) and propose recommendations, many of which, though familiar in classified policy debate (various experts on counterinsurgency have proposed them before in Vietnam), would represent radical, and most improbable, changes in current U.S. strategy, deployment and approach.

These measures would, I believe, be to the good. (They would still, I also believe, be far from adequate to "win"; throughout, the discussion takes inadequate account of the strengths of the Viet Cong, and underrates the vital importance of political aspects of the struggle.) But the very fact that they have never been implemented properly, or at all, is by now a historical datum whose true significance these three writers manage to ignore. To see its bearing mainly as they do -- as positive token that "there is large room for improvement" in U.S.-GVN progress and performance (p. 307) -- seems almost perverse. The assertion cited is most certainly, poignantly true in 1968. But it was equally true in 1958, and 1961, and 1965. And the impending "possibilities" for improvement looked equally "great" (to cite another of Kahn's premises for his conclusion that "we may yet win the war in Vietnam") in those years. What makes these perceptions appear clearly inadequate today as a basis for either prediction or policy -- just as, we can now see, they were misleading then -- is precisely that the room for improvement remains today just as large, and in just the same places, as it was ten years ago, with nearly all the prospective "possibilities" remaining just that.

To understand why we have not done better in Vietnam, and to appraise the prospects and likelihood of doing better in the future, it is by this time far from enough to say, "There are promising measures, some of which worked well, in other hands, against other opponents elsewhere, that have never been fairly tried by the U.S. in Vietnam." One must ask, and attempt to answer, just why they were never tried; what reason there is, now, to believe they are more likely to get a fair trial in the future; and if they do, how likely it is they will be fully effective against this enemy, in this country and time?

It is the events of the last seven years, and especially the last three, that have demonstrated the salience of these questions (and suggested discouraging answers); though not, it would seem, to Kahn and Armbruster, whose recommendations and judgments of feasibility seem scarcely different from what they might have been in 1961 or 1965 (when they would have looked more adequate to many readers, including this one). One wonders what, if anything, these writers have learned from the painful and frustrating experience of those years: specifically, about the characteristics of the U.S. as counterinsurgent (and more generally, as interventionist and as learner), the GVN as ally, the VC as opponent, and Vietnam as environment for a revolutionary conflict.

These are specifics that must underly judgments that would tell the President (more cogently than "we may yet win") how he should bet: the odds -- on adoption of policies, on implementation, on VC (and GVN) counters, on effectiveness -- the costs, the time required, the risks. Such matters are gravely neglected in the discussions of Kahn and Armbruster.

It is only Stillman and Pfaff, in fact, who take seriously the word "we" in addressing the title question. This focus -- which seems to me crucial -- plus their reading of experience both prior to 1961 and after, leads Stillman to conclude (p. 164) that our present choice is between "a painful ending of the war now and a disaster later." Pfaff's subsequent, brief chapter on possible settlements is the best discussion of realistic negotiating aims I have seen, highly to be recommended to the incoming President and his negotiating staff.

Their emphasis -- peculiarly identified with writings by Stillman and Pfaff -- on factors of culture, politics and history, and particularly on American limitations ("Of all nations," Stillman remarks on p. 350, later excepting Albania, "I think that the United States may be one of the least capable of intervening in such a situation successfully") reflects a point of view that may not be conclusive but is highly relevant, neglected, and valuable. If it had been more adequately represented and understood much earlier in our involvement in Southeast Asia, we might have avoided an American tragedy.

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